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ABSTRACT

The author discusses "the parallels between learning English as a foreign language and learning English as a native language and their relevance for the construction of appropriate teaching materials." Four postulates or language universals are presented about the order in which children learn the phonological features of their native language (after Jakobson). The author concludes that "certain phonemes are either more easily perceived visually or acoustically or...are more easily reproduced physiologically." The textbook writer, therefore, should grade English (or other foreign language) teaching materials to reflect this natural order of difficulty. (JD)

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TEFL AND LANGUAGE ONTOGENY

by
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Nowadays, when we are asked to point to some contributions of linguistics to foreign language learning and teaching, we have to acknowledge the existence of a fairly impressive body of evidence. Specially productive in this situation is the increasingly fashionable procedure of making contrastive studies between two languages to account for the learner's difficulties with his new language. Gratifying as it is to observe the bulk of amassed data covering a wide range of languages and teaching situations, it is however somewhat disappointing to find that still so few psycholinguistic insights have been adopted and incorporated into English language teaching materials.

Psycholinguistics, though a relatively new discipline, has become in recent years a major area of research and theoretical effort concerning itself with various topical subfields such as learning theory, verbal learning, verbal conditioning, the psychology of grammar, language ontogeny, language pathology, bilingualism, language change and others. However, there appears to be a persistent omission of these findings in the elaboration of TEFL courses at university level for use in the language laboratory, as well as in the preparation of teaching materials. In fact, a careful examination of different textbooks used in TEFL reveals the fact that writers of such materials appear to be not sufficiently aware of certain basic psycholinguistic postulates.

As the title of this article indicates, it is my purpose to call the reader's attention to the possible parallels between learning English as a foreign language and learning English as a native language, and their relevance for the construction of appropriate teaching materials. So far, textbook writers and educators whose chief intellectual interest has been directed towards the development of TEFL materials

have generally overlooked the problem of language acquisition by the English child either as of little concern to them or as an appropriate field for psycholinguistic investigation only. The present discussion postulates the view that people engaged in such endeavour should no longer choose to remain oblivious of certain basic facts but should rather incorporate those which are applicable and adequate.

Starting from the fact that in the acquisition of English, both as a native language as well as a target language, the learner proceeds from zero structure towards full - or nearly full - structure, and since both processes parallel each other in several other respects, it seems to be not at all unreasonable to demand that writers of TEFL materials should give heed to some language universals found in the process of language acquisition by the English child. Due to space limitations I shall attempt to deal in a general way with the phonological aspect only.

The problem of how children learn to speak has always attracted the attention of linguists, psychologists and educators. From the impressive amount of data contained in thousands of studies it looked as if every child went his own way in mastering the language of his culture. However, this chaotic panorama came to an end with the publication of Jakobson's studies of child language, aphasia, and general sound laws. Some of his postulates as well as those of other linguists can be summarized as follows::

1. In the field of consonants it is established that children favour front consonants first in their imitative language. Front stops are then followed by back ones and next by nasals which are in turn followed by fricatives, affricates and liquids.

2. In the field of vowels the child learns to distinguish, passively and actively, low vowels first, then the mid vowels, and eventually the breakdown of these three major levels into still more refined subdivisions. The same happens with the front and back vowels where a

twofold distinction between front and back vowels is made sooner than a threefold distinction between front, back and central vowels.

3. As for suprasegmentals, it appears from observation that the young child develops an awareness of tonal voice characteristics or intonation patterns prior to gaining any understanding of segmental groupings. This is clearly manifested in the child's expression and reaction to that which is said tenderly as opposed to that which is said in anger.

If these postulates are considered to be language universals, could we not expect textbook writers to make use of them? A child born in an English-speaking community is offered the total range of phonemic contrasts. However, the selection he makes is not a random one, as we have seen. We could therefore conclude that if this selection is made, it must be because certain phonemes are either more easily perceived visually or acoustically, or because they are more easily reproduced physiologically.

If people concerned with the writing of TEFL materials took these findings into account, would this not perhaps result in a far more fruitful phonological grading for our students? Besides, in so doing we would not only be following the phonemic patterning for the acquisition of English but also the phonemic patterning of the mother tongue. Although both processes are not identical - since the foreign learner of English has already acquired the linguistic sophistication of his mother tongue for one thing - it still seems to be common sense to follow a natural law rather than an artificial theory.

What has given ground to this presentation is the examination of the way in which some textbook writers 'throw' the phonology of English at our students in their first lesson. Consider for example:

This is a spoon	These are spoons
this is a knife	these are knives
this is a fork	these are forks
this is a cup	these are cups
this is a watch	these are watches
this is a desk	these are desks
this is a table	these are tables
this is a book	these are books
this is a bag	these are bags
this is a glass	these are glasses
this is a tree	these are trees
this is an aeroplane	these are aeroplanes

This lesson faces the student with the unsurmountable task of internalizing twelve different vocalic nuclei contrasts. Besides it makes indiscriminate use of consonantal phonemes with preponderance of fricatives and affricates, which happen to be the least perceivable visually and acoustically.

When a textbook writer chooses to introduce the mysteries of English to the foreign learner in this fashion, we cannot help asking ourselves what his guiding criteria were:

1. Phonological grading? - None whatsoever.
2. Frequency of the pattern? - Unconvincing, since they are highly improbable sequences for a native speaker to utter.
3. Usefulness of the pattern? - Very debatable, for it is very unlikely that students of English staying in a non English-speaking community would go about pointing at objects and producing these utterances.

The teaching of English to speakers of other languages is not merely a process of teaching new habits and skills through the application of the methods used up to present. It is actually a far more complex psychological performance which in order to be more successfully handled requires a deeper knowledge of the latest findings in the linguistic field.